

Kai's Response to Howard, Hana, Ben, and Dorothy

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It has been quite an experience for me to see something I wrote so long ago refracted through the readings of four colleagues whose views I respect and whose approval I would like to have earned. Looking at the essay again through that new lens makes me wish I could just start over again—express myself more clearly in those passages where I suspect I did not make myself clear, and delete those passages I no longer like as well as I once did. But it's too late for that.

Most of this essay was published in a literary quarterly, *The Yale Review*, of which I was then the improbable editor, although portions of it appeared elsewhere as well. One of the first persons to read it in draft form, Marshall Robinson, described it as “schizophrenic,” by which he had in mind that both its argument and its tone shifted erratically, as if I was indicting sociological writing and defending it at the same time. He was right about that, as he was about so much else. I recognized the problem then, but I could not figure out how to repair it. I really *was* trying to do both things at once: criticize the writing habits of my intellectual kinfolk while at the same time explaining “us” sociologists to “them” literary types.

It is to be expected in this kind of symposium that persons invited to comment on a particular writing will reach into that flow of words and scoop up a handful that allows them to shift over to a subject area in which they are more interested and more comfortable. That is exactly as it should be and exactly what I would have done had the roles been reversed. But it can put the author of the original text on the defensive, so let me begin by offering two instances where I feel misunderstood.

First, Dorothy Smith suggests that the principal difference between her kind of sociology and mine is reflected in the way I speak of viewing life from the 14th floor. If I read her correctly, she is troubled by the thought that sociologists who take that climb are “elevating” themselves above street level and “looking down” on the human scene, and in that way standing “above” people rather than “being among” them. She alludes to that juxtaposition several times.

That way of understanding the metaphor had never occurred to me before. It is certainly not what I had in mind. If I had proposed instead that we sometimes have to venture a few hundred yards out to sea in order to see the true dimensions of the shore, or that we sometimes have to position ourselves under

a flight of birds in order to see the true shape of their formation, the same thought would have been expressed so far as I am concerned. Whether one is “above” or “to the side of” or “underneath” the social scene one is looking at makes no difference at all. These are all ways of establishing a kind of conceptual distance.

And “conceptual” distance *is* what I am talking about here. My metaphor may not have done the work I originally wanted it to, as Hana Brown seems bothered by it as well. I am not proposing that we sociologists should move to some lofty perch and set up our observation posts there. I am speaking of the way we *visualize*, not the way we locate ourselves in space. I have spent a lot of time in the field, most of it in places where there *are* no 14th floors or anything even remotely like them. Those who do that kind of work *always* operate at ground level. There is no other level. So if I propose that we spend a part of the time we are in the field imagining what the scene looks like something at a remove, I am taking it entirely for granted that the data we gather for the purpose are acquired through the gritty processes of talking to, observing, and being among the persons whose experiences of life we are trying to understand. I may refer to “patterns” and “currents,” as we all do, but I assume that the only way we can detect those regularities is to inspect the comings and goings of everyday people. “Patterns” do not reside anywhere else. I think that Hana Brown and I agree here. Dorothy Smith senses a disagreement, and I am not sure I understand why. She would like “statements about the world” to be anchored “in observation,” and feels that I think otherwise. But I cannot imagine from where else on earth such statements could possibly issue.

Looking down at people from a 14th floor, then—or over at them, or up at them—is not a strategy to deny them “participation in the sociological event” or to “displace” them. It is a way of paying attention to that facet of their humanity to which the sociological perspective is particularly sensitive. If we busy ourselves entirely with the behavior of individual birds without maneuvering into a position where we can see the formation they create, we are being lousy sociologists. Hana puts it just right: “This sociological vision is our view of the world but also our means of engaging with it.”

The irony here for me is that the realities of social life Smith thinks one can see only at ground level strike me as precisely the truths I think one can see best from a 14th floor.

When speaking of “institutional ethnography,” she notes: “it recognizes that our everyday doings are coordinated with those of others in relations of which we are generally only marginally, if at all, aware.” That’s it exactly. We sociologists try to discern the contours of that coordination in ways that the persons who collaborate in it are not always able. “The everyday is deeply penetrated, organized, shaped by social relations that coordinate people’s local doings with those of others.” Exactly! To say that social life is “coordinated,”

"organized," "shaped" is to say that it is patterned, and our job as sociologists, looking at all this with a sensibility that derives from a special point of vantage, is to detect the source of that coordination. That's what institutional ethnography is designed to do, isn't it? Smith speaks of a sociology that "stays with people's everyday life experiences, as they know and report them." If she means that we should not try to see beyond the literal content of the reports we get from people, then I disagree. But if she means, as I assume she does, that institutional ethnography is concerned with human doings of which people themselves are not always aware and that "a lot of what people do on the sidewalk" is "taken for granted" and is "not fully visible on the street," then I have a hard time seeing where we differ. Smith notes that the task of institutional ethnography is to "discover" how "the present-in-the-everyday extra-local relations are themselves actually being put together." It "directs attention to how people's activities on the street . . . are coordinated in social relations beyond it." To my way of thinking, that *is* the view from the 14th floor.

Second, the new perspective I have recently been provided makes me wish I had not used the word "style" in my original statement. The word seems more likely these days to refer to surface appearances and decorative touches than it does to the logic of construction, which is what I take it to mean in the vocabularies of Kenneth Burke, say, or of Strunk and White. Ben Agger suggests that I take great store in language that is "felicitous" or "pretty" or "pleasing." I guess I do, but I am not asking that of anyone. I take great store in language that is *clear*, which is a quality about which several of the writers he speaks of with at least some approval seem to be a bit suspicious. I agree with much of what he is saying. Words (and especially numbers) have a way of framing things of the real world in such a way as to solidify them, to "freeze" them. They lend an impression of stability and permanence to what are often no more than flickering instants in the flow of time. They lend an impression of substance to what are often no more than transitory wisps of vapor. But I cannot help but think that those otherwise freezing words can have a thawing effect when employed in sentences that themselves respect the fluid nature of reality. At its best a sentence moves, like rolling film. A word just sits there inert, like a still photograph. That's one of the reasons why careful composition is so important. I do not want to annoy Agger any further than I already have, but I would accuse him of being very good at such sentences himself.

It is hard for me to see how writing that does not "strive to be understood" can be called "writing" at all. Part of me can appreciate the virtues of a prose that means to represent the opaqueness of the world out there by being deliberately opaque itself, but the other part, a grim, humorless Calvinist when it comes to writing, wonders whether other media—painting, for example—would do a better job of that. I do not have any real problem with Agger's

argument as an intellectual matter, but as a temperamental one my plan is to slog on anyway as if language could be a saving grace rather than an obstacle to understanding

Hana Brown wishes that sociologists would turn to stories more often as a way to enrich, humanize, and give flesh to our analyses, and I agree. Howie Becker points out that many of the processes we study are themselves stories, if only in the sense that they take the form of sequences. I agree with that too. I think I got into trouble with both of them when I wrote that sociologists are likely “to think in terms of collateral arrangements rather than sequential ones,” and for that reason are “rarely in a position to employ a narrative line, or simply to tell a story.” I did write later in the essay that “relations between things and *changes in those relations* are what sociologists take as their subject matter,” but the damage was done. My point was a relatively innocent one—that sociologists rarely have the luxury of conveying the complexity of their subject matter by turning it into a narrative. Howie speaks of the “routinization of charisma,” and relates it as a story in a way few others could. I would guess, though, that if Weber had been able to join our conversation he would argue that he could never have conveyed his idea to others by narrating it as Howie just did. The life of a charismatic figure does not qualify as a useful *sociological* datum until such time as it becomes an instance of some wider regularity found in social life. And that raises the question: If we draw attention to a sequence of events reflected in the biographies of a mass of persons, are we telling a story? Perhaps we are, but it is a very different matter to relate the life of Jeanne d’Arc to an audience sitting around a campfire than it is to identify a number of qualities found in the lives of hundreds of individuals, of which she is one.

We can say that Charles Darwin was telling a story, as was Karl Marx. Immanuel Wallerstein, of whom I will speak in a moment (although, as someone pointed out rather impishly in *The American Sociological Review* a few years ago, he can never qualify as a true social *scientist* because he only has an “n” of one), is working on one now. Social scientists often tell stories in the same sense, drawing on sociological forms of knowledge to illuminate historical happenings of one kind or another. Max Weber on the Protestant Ethic is an example. So is Robert Merton on the emergence of Western science or Michel Foucault on the origins of the asylum. Others of us tell stories over and over again, calling them “life histories” or “illustrations” to indicate that they are meant as cases in point, instances of some larger social pattern.

Most of the work I have done (to draw once again on that ever reliable and ever convenient archive) could be described as a huge interweaving of stories and personal narratives. They have been my principal data for decades. But it is what those stories *share in common* that constitutes the sociological news, and that, I would still argue, is what makes our work more difficult and our writing

more complex than is the case for historians relating a series of events or biographers tracing out the lives of individuals. I kind of envy them.

My list of exemplary writers of sociological prose would include quite a few of the people Howie Becker refers to. His list, like mine, draws heavily on persons of his and my generation and that of our teachers, but perhaps we can be forgiven for that. I would give Erving Goffman a position of special honor on that list: he used English in a way that is widely admired in literary circles, but at the same time he came close to making of it a language all his own, perfectly suited to his unique sensibility. I would reserve a place for Howie on Howie's list. And I would put Immanuel Wallerstein up there too. Wallerstein writes of a very different segment of the human universe than Goffman did. He is able to reach across dozens of cultural realms, thousands of years, and millions of people in the space of a sentence, but everything he writes is clear and crisp and spare as well as elegant. He too makes it easy for readers to know if and where they disagree with him because he describes the contours of the world he is speaking of with such clarity and precision that there is no mistaking them. I find his prose "felicitous" and "pleasing." I don't find it "pretty," however. For Wallerstein, never a grace note or any other ornament, never an adjective or adverb inserted for the purpose of italicizing a noun, never the kind of mannered flourish found in so many forms of sociological writing, including my own. Wallerstein has found a voice that is neatly suited to the way his mind—a finely-tuned instrument—apprehends the social world.

I say this in part to make a point that Stanton Wheeler, who read a draft of this essay, found lacking in it: that I spoke of the "language" of sociology when I should have spoken of "the languages." Indeed so. Hughes and Lazarsfeld and especially Merton were among the voices that rang the truest to me when I was learning the craft. Goffman and Lieberman and Wallerstein, of my own generation, are among those that I most admire now. And they are all very different.

So, to bring things to a close, I would continue to suggest that sociologists, at their best, look at the world through a differently ground set of lenses than do observers from other disciplines, and that the nature of those lenses places a burden on the way we report what we think we see out there. To speak that way is not to defend jargon or convoluted sentence structure. It is only to note that we ask a lot of language. We are often in the position of being able to convey what we hope to only by putting familiar words to unfamiliar purposes, which means that we are fated (sorry Howie) to spend a good deal of time defining and qualifying and honing the words we use.

The sociological vision, then, does not require awkward prose. But it does require careful composition, and I think everyone in this symposium, beginning with the Editor who brought us together, feels that the effort is worth it.

And why? When we write we are teaching, and it is important that our students (and I am not only speaking here of our apprentices in the craft) share our understandings of social life. And, more to the point, when we write we are engaging in (Hana's word) the world we are a part of and it is essential that we find ways to convey what we think we have learned in a language that contributes to the commonweal.